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Saudi Academy in Va. revises Islamic history books

By MATTHEW BARAKAT -- 6 hours ago

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (AP) — An Islamic school in northern Virginia with close ties to the Saudi government has revised its religious textbooks in an effort to end years of criticism that the school fosters hatred and intolerance.

While the Islamic Saudi Academy deleted some of the most contentious passages from the texts, copies provided to The Associated Press show that enough sensitive material remains to fuel critics who claim the books show intolerance toward those who do not follow strict interpretations of Islam.

The academy, which teaches nearly 900 students in grades K-12 at its campus just outside the Capital Beltway, developed new Islamic studies textbooks for all grades after a 2008 congressional report called portions of the previous editions troubling. The school provided the AP copies of the new textbooks, which revise language on hot-button issues such as requiring women to cover their heads and how Muslims should relate to people of other religions.

School officials say the books are part of the school's effort to promote universal values of tolerance and kindness and modernize some of the lessons.

They've had to make similar defenses before.

The school was founded in 1984 and largely stayed out of the spotlight until the Sept. 11 attacks, which focused attention on the Saudi educational system. In December 2001, two former ISA students, Mohammed El-Yacoubi and Mohammed Osman Idris, were denied entry into Israel when authorities there found El-Yacoubi carrying what the FBI believed was a suicide note linked to a planned martyrdom operation in Israel.

In 2005, a former ISA valedictorian, Ahmed Omar Abu Ali, was convicted in federal court of joining al-Qaida while attending college in Saudi Arabia and plotting to assassinate President George W. Bush.

Last year, the school's then-director, Abdalla al-Shabnan, was convicted of failing to report a suspected case of child sex abuse.

Last year also was when the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom released a report saying the school's textbooks contained several troubling passages, including one saying it is permissible for Muslims to kill adulterers and converts from Islam and another saying "the Jews conspired against Islam and its people."

The new books don't contain those passages. The AP reviewed them with assistance from Ali al-Ahmed, director of the Institute for Gulf Affairs in Washington, who has criticized the academy and the books used there and in schools in Saudi Arabia.

While the academy's books borrow extensively from those used in the Saudi system, they also revise and delete certain words and passages. For instance, the books used in Saudi Arabia say that women must cover their face and body to conform with Islam's tenets. The ISA textbooks, though, only talk about covering the body. Words like "kaffir," which is often translated as "infidel," have been replaced with more neutral words like "non-Muslim."

Some sensitive sections survived the revisions, though. One of the few references to Christians and Jews, or "People of the Book," disparages scholars in those faiths for rejecting the truth of Islam.

"Scholars of the People of the Book know that Islam is the true path because they find it in their books," an 11th-grade textbook reads. "But they shy away out of ignorance and stubbornness. And God knows their deeds and will judge them."

The school's director, Abdulrahman Alghofaili, said Judaism, Christianity and Islam all claim to "set themselves apart as singular representatives of divine truth and the path to salvation." The passage in the textbook, he said, is no different from the First Commandment, which states, "You shall have no other gods before me."

Alghofaili said the changes were meant to better translate lessons from an ancient text for a modern audience, and weren't made to appease outside critics.

"We know our students' needs. We believe these books match their needs," Alghofaili said.

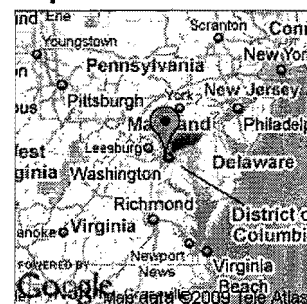
Al-Ahmed, whose group monitors politics and education in the Gulf, said the revised texts now being used at ISA make some small improvements in tone. But he said it's clear from the books that the core ideology behind them — a puritanical strain of Islam known as Wahhabism that is dominant within Saudi Arabia — remains intact.

"It shows they have no intention of real reform," al-Ahmed said.

Al-Ahmed cited other passages that, while not offensive, reflect what he sees as a medieval mentality despite the academy's efforts to modernize. One chapter deals extensively with sorcery, for instance, while another warns Muslims to be careful in accepting party and wedding

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Map



invitations from non-Muslims.

"We don't live in the desert 1,000 years ago," al-Ahmed said. "It's disconnected from today because the authorities themselves are disconnected."

Eleanor Doumato, a visiting fellow in international studies at Brown University who reviewed the textbooks at the academy's request, endorsed their contents.

These "books do not contain inflammatory material, nor do they encourage students to exhibit intolerance," she wrote in a letter co-signed by Gregory Starrett, an anthropology professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. "In addition, these books counsel patience, gratitude, kindness, honesty and other important moral qualities that are encouraged by Muslims and non-Muslims alike."

Doumato and Starrett were paid by the academy to conduct their review.

Dwight Bashir, a policy analyst with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said an independent academic review of the new textbooks is needed.

One such review is being conducted by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, a regional accrediting body. The association initiated a review of the school's accreditation status last year, and is looking at the new textbooks as part of its review. Spokeswoman Jennifer Oliver said the review is ongoing.

Associated Press writer Nafeesa Syeed contributed to this report.


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